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TAGS: [PREL](#) [FR](#) [IZ](#) [IR](#)
SUBJECT: MFA THINKING ON IRAN AND IRAQ

Classified By: Political Minister-Counselor Kathleen
[U](#)H. Allegrone, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[U](#)1. (C) Summary: Franck Gellet, MFA DAS-equivalent for Iraq, Iran, and the Arabian Peninsula, acknowledged progress over the past year in Iraq and said that as a result, France had moved away from its previous idea of convening an international conference to promote Iraqi national reconciliation. Instead, France will continue to encourage Iraq's Arab neighbors to engage diplomatically with Baghdad. Gellet stressed that neither France nor Europe were in a financial position to undertake new reconstruction projects in an oil-rich state, but said that the GOF was actively encouraging French companies to do business in Iraq. Turning to Iran, Gellet repeated that Paris' relations with Tehran were "unraveling" due to Iran's unwillingness to make any effort at restoring confidence. He predicted that the standoff over Iran's nuclear program would eventually have to be resolved by force, and said he is freely sharing that analysis with French companies to encourage those already doing business in Tehran to exercise prudence and dissuade newcomers from setting up shop there. Gellet described himself as an advocate of a categorical ban on Iranian students pursuing studies in mathematics or the sciences in France, a view not fully shared within the GOF. End summary.

MFA DAS Acknowledges Progress in Iraq

[U](#)2. (C) Poloffs met September 11 with Franck Gellet, MFA DAS-equivalent for Iraq, Iran and the Arabian Peninsula; Amb. Xavier Roze, Inter-Ministerial Coordinator for Iraqi Reconstruction; and Arnaud Pescheux, desk officer for Iraq and Iran. Gellet, who served for two years as the French DCM in Baghdad and who believed as recently as a year ago that the Iraq war was irretrievably "lost," reiterated that the Quai d'Orsay's analysis of Iraq has changed in response to positive developments. In particular, he cited the dramatically improved security situation, the ebbing of the Sunni insurgency, the emergence of Prime Minister Maliki as a more confident and capable leader, the slow but discernible political progress towards national reconciliation, and moves by Iraq's Arab neighbors to establish embassies in Baghdad. "Bravo," he offered, tacitly conceding that his earlier pessimism had been misplaced.

[U](#)3. (C) As the situation on the ground has changed in Iraq, so have French concerns. Gellet said he was troubled by reports that the Kurds are increasingly at odds with Iraq's Sunni and Shia communities, both of which are increasingly annoyed by Kurdish positions on issues such as Kirkuk, oil revenues, and the borders of the Kurdish Region. The French have therefore been offering their Kurdish interlocutors some candid advice, reminding them that they must be realistic and should not expect even a long-term U.S. military presence to shield them if they antagonize all their Arab neighbors. In addition,

Gellet expressed concern at Iranian efforts to increase Tehran's influence . . .

¶4. (C) What this has meant in policy terms, Gellet continued, is that France has decisively moved away from its long-standing idea of an international conference to promote Iraqi national reconciliation. With Iraq moving towards something that looks like normalization, the French are now more interested in helping that process along than in re-inventing the Iraqi constitutional wheel. In particular, Gellet said that France would continue to encourage Iraq's Arab neighbors to engage with the GOI (Gellet pointed to FM Kouchner's visit to Baghdad as a case of France "leading by example" in that regard). Recent decisions by some Arab states to reopen embassies or send high-level visitors to Baghdad showed that Iraq's majority Sunni neighbors were adapting to or encouraged by the new reality. He noted, however, that bringing Saudi King Abdallah around was a nearly impossible task. "The King will never accept a Shi'a government in Baghdad . . . it's as if Protestants had taken over Rome," said Gellet.

¶5. (C) Poloffs took the opportunity to review with Gellet some of the Department's proposals on increasing French involvement in Iraq. Unfortunately, Gellet made clear (with Amb. Rose nodding in agreement) that France, which finds itself in a difficult fiscal environment, had no intention of undertaking reconstruction projects in what Paris sees as a cash-rich oil-state. Rather, with the exception of on-going aid projects in the Kurdish zone around Irbil, such as in the health sector, French support would continue to be primarily diplomatic (i.e., encouraging Iraq's neighbors to engage with and aid the Iraqi government) and moral (i.e., encouraging French companies to do business in Iraq). Asked how France was using its EU presidency to further EU support for Iraq, Gellet was somewhat dismissive of the EU as an institution, saying that non-Europeans often misperceived the EU as a federation when in fact it was nothing more than a forum for technical cooperation. Even in that context, Gellet offered no hope that a Europe that remained divided over how to deal with Iraq was likely to come up with additional economic or technical assistance in the foreseeable future. (Comment: This attitude stands in sharp contrast to French expectations that upon assuming the EU presidency Paris would be able to rally stronger EU support for Baghdad. Rather than focusing on how the EU could complement UN-led reconstruction efforts, Gellet indicated that France was mostly seeking to get other EU members to make unilateral political gestures such as ministerial visits. To date, he acknowledged, this approach has had limited success: German FM Steinmeier, for example, had not visited Baghdad as expected. When we asked why President Sarkozy had not cited Iraq as a French foreign policy priority in his recent address to French ambassadors, Gellet sought to minimize the importance of this slight, claiming initially that Iraq was not as pressing in terms of current events given the improved security situation, but later contending that Sarkozy's diplomatic advisor, Jean-David Levitte, had removed all references to Iraq from the speech. End comment.)

Iran

¶6. (C) Turning to Iran, Gellet repeated his frequent lament over the past year that France's bilateral relationship with Tehran continued to "unravel" just as it did for the Germans, the UK and others (albeit at different speeds). The core problem remained that the Iranians were doing nothing to create an atmosphere of trust. In terms of the regime's internal dynamics, Pescheux said the French MFA had finally given up trying to make sense of the relationship between Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad, a relationship that was opaque even to officials at the French Embassy in Tehran. When Pescheux suggested that tensions had led to a diminution in the number of senior Iranian contacts in Tehran, Gellet hastened to correct him by saying that France nevertheless retained "quite a few" Iranian interlocutors. With respect to next summer's presidential

elections, Gellet noted that Tehran Mayor Qaliboff, whom Gellet described as a "pragmatic conservative," might emerge as a potential rival to Ahmadinejad. He noted that Qaliboff has been using the excuse of city-to-city diplomacy to visit places such as London and thus to raise his international profile. An anticipated visit to Paris had not yet materialized. Nonetheless, Gellet suspected that any differences between Qaliboff and Ahmadinejad on the Iranian nuclear program were probably tactical rather than strategic.

Gellet worried that Iran's intransigence on the nuclear file would eventually lead to armed conflict between Iran and the international community and said he is sharing this analysis with French business leaders to encourage those already doing business there to exercise prudence and reconsider their position and to dissuade newcomers from doing business with Iran. (Gellet's line is essentially: "Do you really want to be on the ground in Tehran once the shooting starts and the Iranians start looking for some easy targets for retaliation?") Gellet expressed some concern that Israel, sensing a narrowing window of opportunity after the November election, might strike pre-emptively but would not be able to do much more than to scratch the surface of the Iranian program. Then the Iranians would strike back, inevitably dragging the U.S. and others into the conflict "before we are ready." Gellet and his colleagues also asked about USG intentions vis-a-vis Iran, including the prospect of a renewed diplomatic presence in Tehran via an expanded U.S. Interests Section; Poloffs replied that no such expansion had been announced, although the idea had been briefly discussed in the context of outreach to the Iranian public.

17. (C) During a brief discussion of tightening sanctions against Iran, Gellet stated that he was taking a rather contrary position within the GOF by advocating a total ban on Iranian students pursuing any course of study in mathematics or science (with a possible exception for medical students), as opposed to current French policy, which only bans Iranian students from courses of study that are seen as having the potential to directly support Iran's nuclear program. Gellet saw no reason to risk allowing Iranians to pursue degrees in advanced mathematics, for example, if they might then apply that knowledge to the nuclear or other WMD programs. On the other hand, he posited that France and other European states should encourage Iranian students to pursue degrees in the liberal arts that would expose them to Western thought and values.

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